



4woman.gov

800-994-WOMAN (9662)

888-220-5446 (TDD)

The National Women's Health Information Center

A project of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health



Frequently Asked Questions about Panic Disorder

What is panic disorder?

Panic disorder is a real illness that can be treated to help a person have a healthy and full life. It is a type of *anxiety disorder*. With this disorder, a person can feel frequent and sudden intense fear for no reason. These frequent “bursts” of intense fear are called panic attacks. During these attacks, you can have scary physical feelings like a fast heartbeat, trouble breathing, or dizziness.

Panic attacks can happen at any time and without any warning. They can happen anywhere – in grocery stores, malls, crowds, or when traveling. A person can live in constant fear of another attack, staying away from places where past attacks have happened. This fear can take over a person’s life, making her or him unable to leave their home (a condition called *agoraphobia*). While panic attacks don’t last long, they are scary, making them feel like they could last forever. This disorder can last for a few months or go on for many years, even with treatment.

It’s important to know that when a person has this illness, it’s not her or his fault. And, it’s not something a person can just “snap out of.” No one knows for sure what causes panic disorder. It most often starts when people are young, around 18 to 24 years old. It also can begin when a person is already under a lot of stress, such as after the death of a loved one or having a baby. While anyone can have this disorder, it affects women more than it does men. And, it can run in families.

What are the symptoms of panic disorder?

With panic disorder, a person has sudden bursts of fear for no reason. Physical symptoms can also happen: Research suggests that symptoms can become worse when a person is under stress. Symptoms include:

- Chest pain or pressure.
- Racing or pounding heart, or skipping heartbeats.
- Difficulty breathing, catching your breath, or a choking feeling.
- Feeling dizzy or lightheaded.
- Sweating a lot.
- Chills or hot flashes.
- Stomach problems, nausea, or feeling like you need to throw up.
- Shaking, trembling, or feeling tingling in parts of your body.
- Feeling out of control.

- Feeling unreal, or detached from your body.
- Fear of death or going crazy.

When a person has a panic attack they can:

- Have the urge to run away, or feel a need to escape.
- Think that something awful might happen like death, heart attack, not being able to breath, losing control, or becoming embarrassed.
- Worry a lot that the attack will happen again. This may cause a person to avoid places or situations they may have triggered the attack (like an elevator or crowded amusement park).

Panic disorder is not the same as everyday anxiety. This disorder usually doesn't go away by itself. But, with proper treatment, a person with this illness can be helped. If it is not treated, the illness can take over a person's life and affect relationships and work. A person can also become very depressed without treatment, turning to alcohol and drugs for relief.

What should I do if I think I have panic disorder?

If you think you may have symptoms of a panic disorder, a visit to your doctor is the best place to start. Your doctor will perform a careful exam to figure out whether your symptoms are really due to this illness, or if you have another anxiety disorder or problem.

Sometimes a person can feel awkward talking to a health care provider about panic disorders. They may blame themselves, think their condition is not serious, or feel embarrassed. Keep in mind that this illness can be treated. In fact, proper treatment reduces or stops panic attacks in 70 to 90 percent of people. Many people feel much better just within a few weeks or months after starting treatment. Be aware that all anxiety disorders are not treated the same.

The next step your doctor may suggest is a visit with a mental health professional. This includes psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and counselors. It is best to look for a professional who has special training in cognitive-behavioral and/or behavioral therapy. Try to find someone who is open to the use of medications, should they be needed. And if they are not a medical doctor, be sure they work with one so medication can be prescribed. Keep in mind that when you start taking medicine, it may not start working right away. You need to give your body a few weeks to get used to the medicine. Then, you and your doctor can decide if it's working.

You can get free information about anxiety disorders from the National Institute of Mental Health. Call toll free 1-88-88-ANXIETY.

It's very important that you feel comfortable with your treatment. If this is not the case, seek help elsewhere. If you've been taking medication, don't stop it all of a sudden. These drugs need to be tapered off slowly, under the care of your doctor. Talk with your doctor about how to stop the medication you're taking.

How is panic disorder treated?

Anxiety disorders are among the most common of all the mental disorders. Many people misunderstand these disorders and think people should be able to overcome the symptoms by sheer willpower. But, the symptoms can't be willed or wished away. There are treatments, developed through research, that work well for these disorders.

Anxiety disorders are treated in two ways – with medication and with certain types of psychotherapy (sometimes called “talk therapy”). Sometimes only one treatment is used or both treatments are combined. If you have an anxiety disorder, talk with your doctor about what will work best for you. If you do choose psychotherapy, make sure the therapist is able to provide you with medication, if needed.

A number of drugs used for treating depression, called *antidepressants*, have been found to help with anxiety disorders as well. *Monoamine oxidase inhibitors* (MAOIs) are used, along with the newer selective *serotonin reuptake inhibitors* (SSRIs). Other medicines include anti-anxiety drugs called *benzodiazepines* and *beta-blockers*.

Treatment with psychotherapy includes *cognitive-behavioral therapy* (CBT) and *behavioral therapy*. In CBT, the goal is to change how a person thinks about, and then reacts to, a situation that makes them anxious or fearful. In behavioral therapy, the focus is on changing how a person reacts to a situation. CBT or behavioral therapy most often lasts for 12 weeks. It can be group or individual therapy. Some studies have shown that the benefits of CBT or behavioral therapy last longer than do those of medications for people with panic disorder.

Keep in mind that it can be a challenge to find the right treatment for an anxiety disorder. But, if one treatment doesn't work, the odds are good that another one will. Your doctor and therapist will work together to help you find the best approach. New treatments are being developed through ongoing research. So, don't give up hope. If you have recovered from an anxiety disorder and it comes back at a later date, don't think that you've failed. You can be treated again. And, the skills you learned dealing with the disorder the first time can help you in coping with it again.

What can I do to help myself if I have panic disorder?

Many people find it helps to join a support group because they can share their problems and successes with others who are going through the same thing. While it doesn't take the place of mental health care, talking with trusted friends or a member of your faith community can also be very helpful. Family members can play an important role in a person's treatment by offering support. Learning how to manage stress will help you to stay calm and focused. Research suggests that aerobic exercise (like jogging, bicycling and swimming) may be of value as well. Other studies have found that caffeine, illegal drugs, and some over-the-counter cold medicines can worsen the symptoms of these disorders. Check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking any over-the-counter medicines.

What is the latest research on anxiety disorders?

The National Institute of Mental Health supports research into the causes, prevention, and treatment of anxiety disorders and other mental illnesses. Studies are ongoing for how family background (genetics) and life experience puts a person at risk for these disorders. New drugs are being tested in clinical trials, as well as therapy approaches. For information on clinical trials, go to the NIMH web site <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/studies/index.cfm> and the National Library of Medicine's clinical trials database at <http://www.clinicaltrials.gov>.

This FAQ was adapted from anxiety disorder fact sheets of the National Institute of Mental Health: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/anxiety/panicfacts.cfm>; <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/anxiety/panri1.cfm>; <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/anxiety/getpd.cfm>

For more information...

You can find out more about panic disorders and anxiety disorders, and their treatments by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center at (800) 994-9662 or the following organizations:

National Institute of Mental Health

Phone Number(s): (888) 826-9438 Anxiety Information, (800) 647-2642 Panic Disorder Information

Internet Address: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

Anxiety Disorders Association of America

Phone Number(s): (301) 231-9350

Internet Address: <http://www.adaa.org>

National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse

Phone Number(s): (800) 553-4539

Internet Address: <http://www.mhselfhelp.org>

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill

Phone Number(s): (800) 950-6264

Internet Address: <http://www.nami.org>

All material contained in this FAQ is free of copyright restrictions, and may be copied, reproduced, or duplicated without permission of the Office on Women's Health in the Department of Health and Human Services; citation of the sources is appreciated.

This FAQ has been reviewed by Regina T. Dolan-Sewell, Ph.D., of the National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health.

August 2002